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QUE VEUT DIRE "SAVOIR LE FRANÇAIS"?

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IN OCTOBER, 1919, I wrote on a blackboard visible to some sixty students the following question: "Que veut dire *Savoir le français?*" A few days later, I endeavoured to answer this inquiry systematically. I venture now to give a wider circulation to my original series of answers (amplified by further reflection) in the belief that, however imperfect, the present statement may serve as a practical guide in the proportioning of our instruction, in helping to lay a good course and to keep our bearings; to stress duly each of the various phases of knowledge that happen to fall within our domain, and to appraise with a pretty clear sense of relative values not only the work done by each of our students of French but our own work (for them and for ourselves) as well.

Mutatis mutandis, what follows seems to be applicable to the study of other languages—especially, however, of other living languages.

I

First, What is French? To any thinking person with even an elementary knowledge of political and linguistic history, it must be obvious that there can be no concise answer to this question—also no precise definition that shall not be arbitrary, personal; for neither geographical boundaries nor any exact date when Latin became "French" can be scientifically stated: we must content ourselves with some approximate definition in the hope that it will be regarded as an adequate basis for the analytical replies to be given presently to our inquiry: "Que veut dire *savoir le français?*" My own approximate definition, expressed briefly, takes the following form: "French" is the name which it has been found convenient to give to the many dialects and *patois*

spoken in the territory now known as "France"—not including Provençal, nor Basque, nor Breton; nor any other form of speech not of Latin origin, except of course the non-Latin elements in "French"—during the period for which we have written evidence: about 843 A. D. to the present time; "French" is also a convenient name to give to the literary or other documents in which the dialects (or *patois*) above mentioned have been used since about 843 A. D. But the type of French with which most students are concerned is preëminently the dialect of the Ile-de-France as spoken and written by educated people (usually of French nationality) in France and elsewhere—for example, in part of Switzerland and in Belgium. This dialect we may call Standard French.

II

Of the many ways of *knowing French* presently to be mentioned, virtually all fall within the ideal scope of philology, as well as various other kinds of knowledge which have, or seem to have, no very direct bearing on the everyday procedure of our classrooms. Such at all events, I think, is the usual view—particularly striking when it is held by persons who are giving or pursuing courses of study the basis of which is philological. If its name is not Philology, what is the name of that branch of study which requires precise knowledge of languages (in all their known or knowable states of development) and thereby makes possible precise interpretations of the literatures that those languages happen to express—of everything that those languages happen to express? What value has "knowledge" if it is not precise? The origins and ever-changing characteristics of the French language, for example, cannot be well understood without detailed study of its sources and of other Romanic languages. All the great dictionaries of French are the result of such investigations, or contribute to them. All fundamental grammars deal, historically or otherwise, with the forms, sounds, and syntax of visible and audible ideas, stating the principles which underlie their formation, and thus contributing to lexicography. The esthetic interpretation of texts, as well as other kinds of interpretations, if such interpretation is to be worth anything, necessarily depends upon a precise understanding—though it may be well to add that a precise

knowledge of *le Voyage de M. Perrichon* is much less difficult to attain than a precise knowledge of *la Chanson de Roland*—a good reason for preferring the former for elementary instruction. If we accept the apparently axiomatic (but generally neglected) doctrine that it is best to understand what we would explain, precision must accompany strenuous or patient labour and the scholar finds himself endeavouring to focus the rays of his searchlight. Error, frequent and often egregious, can be avoided only by scientific concentration. Philology is not merely the palontology of language; it is the life-study, the biology, of human thought as expressed by speech; its purpose is to discover and interpret facts; therefore impressionism and the personal "reactions" characteristic of most esthetic criticism of literature are not within its field but belong to amateurs, though of course such reactions are often highly entertaining and always instructive when they happen to coincide with the truth. Whatever the limitations of the individual philologist—of the French of Diez, Gaston Paris says, "*ce français qu'il savait si bien et qu'il parlait si mal*"—, philology requires a knowledge of the political and social history of the French as well as of French, the acquisition of whatever knowledge may be needed to understand or to explain something in French (our particular topic) that needs explanation, *from whatever branch of learning the explanation may have to be derived.*

This very brief characterization corresponds, I believe, to the ideal generally held by men who have distinguished themselves in philology and by those persons who study the works of such men. "Je suis philologue," said Professor Joseph Bédier some years ago, quite incidentally, in a charming talk on old *chansons*; to most of his audience, these three words may have seemed merely an evidence of modesty—as indeed they were—rather than what they seemed to me—a definition of a representative of a methodical, precise, and useful branch of learning! Whoever has read and understood Mr. Bédier's "*Chateaubriand en Amérique: vérité et fiction*" has seen how philological methods, applied in this case to a modern subject, differ from those of the impressionist. Paleography, the history of early and modern printing, critical bibliography, experimental phonetics—all these, and other subjects, are philological, as well as the various branches

previously mentioned, and all are indispensable to anyone who wishes to go at all deeply into the French literature of the Middle Ages or the Renaissance (otherwise fields for guesswork), and even of very modern literature, provided the student prefers facts to the various things so easily offered and so commonly accepted as such. However, educated French people, or foreigners who have had a similar or equivalent linguistic training, need not possess even a smattering of philological lore to write and speak "perfectly" the French of our time, or to enjoy intelligently a book by Anatole France or *le Voyage de M. Perrichon*, and what not, though (we may say truly) our students seldom can intelligently enjoy such writings without a Vocabulary and some explanatory Notes.¹

III

All that follows in these pages concerns almost exclusively the different ways of knowing modern French—by which term I mean (1) French writings of, say, the last hundred years, such French writings as can be understood readily by cultivated Frenchmen who have had no special training in the history of their language, though nearly all such persons have studied the seventeenth-century classics; by which I mean also (2) familiarity with the spoken French of our time, and (3) the ability to write idiomatic modern French or any kind of acceptable ("correct") French.

Without possessing more, at best, than a very superficial knowledge of the history of the French language (as outlined above), foreigners—for example, ourselves—may by intelligent study and intelligent practice acquire *skill* of various kinds:²

1. *Skill in translating French, accurately, into idiomatic English:* for bad English cannot be accepted as a translation of good French.

Whether *made after study*, or *improvised* (thus we subdivide this kind of skill), the translation should be not only accurate in details—that is, convey to the English-speaking reader or hearer

¹ Surely every *teacher* of French should endeavour to learn as much about philology (in its relevant bearing) as his time, his talents, and his opportunities permit, and surely every undergraduate or graduate student of French should at least be made aware of the ideals that philology requires.

² It is not probable that these 23 or more different ways of "knowing" French (specifically, Modern French) are all; but they at least suffice to provide a system to guide in teaching and to appraise the results of our teaching and of our study.

the same fundamental ideas as the French author intended to convey to his readers or hearers—but it should be as similar as possible in *tone*: not racy if the original is deliberate, nor uniformly elegant if the original is anywhere inelegant, nor impassioned if the original is cold, nor cacophonous (hard to read aloud) if the original is smooth; nor should it be markedly clearer than the original unless the translator specifically justifies his greater clarity (for example, because he has the original author's permission thus to improve the author's style, or because he explicitly states his intention to increase the value of some didactic work, e.g., a scientific treatise); translations which vary intentionally to a marked degree from the original are properly *versions* or *adaptations*.

Verse is almost invariably more difficult to translate than prose; to be more accurate, good translations into verse require a rarer kind of skill; the masterly translations of French or other foreign verse are far rarer than the masterly translations of French or other foreign prose; various Elizabethan translations of Ronsard, Du Bartas, and some other French writers of the 16th century, are masterpieces of translation; likewise the English translations by Andrew Lang and Bourdillon of *Aucassin et Nicolette*; likewise many parts of John Payne's Villon. The vast majority of our translations are inaccurate—for three reasons: either the translator did not understand the original or he had an inadequate knowledge of English or (occasionally) the English language happened or happens to have no good equivalent for the original word or phrase (especially when a rime is required); often the translator falls short in all respects.

It sometimes happens that persons really understand the original without knowing, or knowing how to find, the English equivalent.

The best translations are in general very idiomatic, i.e., they cannot easily be translated back into the precise forms used by the original author; unidiomatic translations constantly reveal the original form (e.g., "There remained only a piece of cheese"—better, "There was nothing left but a bit of cheese"); *appeler un chat un chat* means to "call a spade a spade."

2. Good improvised translations (translations at sight) of course show more power than equally good translations that have been prepared.

3. Oral translations (requiring ready knowledge) are better tests of skill than written translations (which give the translator more time to reflect).

4. A fourth and highly valuable kind of skill consists in knowing how to translate written English into written French.

5. Still greater skill is displayed by the person who can immediately give a good oral translation of something that has just been said in French or that he has before him, for the first time, in writing. This degree of skill is required of the interpreters connected with armies, embassies, courts of justice, etc.

Remark: Translation is usually the only convenient means of learning whether a student has understood what he has just seen (read) or heard in French.

6. The ability to understand lectures given in French about subjects with which the student is more or less familiar.

7. The ability to understand such lectures and to take useful notes on them.

8. The ability to write correctly (without interrupting or asking for a repetition of any well-pronounced word) French dictated at the same speed as English which we could write from dictation.

Remark: In French, as in English, punctuation is for the most part highly uncertain and therefore only gross mistakes should be noted.

9. The ability readily to understand colloquial spoken French—at all events, such spoken French as falls within our range of ideas (our knowledge of various subjects).

10. The power to recall quickly and employ correctly the French form of some English form which we ourselves have just offered, or very recently offered, as a translation.³

³ If, often only a few seconds after reading a French text aloud; if, often only a few seconds after translating a given passage from French into English, a pupil cannot reproduce, either exactly or approximately, the original French form of this expression or that—not even a respectable proportion of the five or six useful idioms that may occur within the five or ten lines that he has just read, *what* has that student observed? *what* has he learned? I ask this question because I think that pupils should be expected (stimulated) to observe far more closely than they generally do and because I believe that in any text suitable for linguistic training both the teacher and the pupil can find plenty of matter fit for proper tests and for many kinds of development: mere reproduction is not a sufficiently instructive test and, if demanded too markedly, may make the pupil suspect that he is being trained as parrots are trained.

11. The power to store our minds with the French that we have read (or heard) for ready use, a month or more afterward; the power to recall, without groping, most of the useful words and idioms that we have been supposed to observe, that we should have observed, during the careful study of a given French text.

Remark on 10 and 11: There are many students who can translate well enough but who seem to forget within a few seconds what it was they translated. Such students probably enrich and improve their English (if their instructor requires good English for good French!) through translation; but their progress in *French*, at best, hardly does more than increase what is called their "reading knowledge"; this kind of knowledge is at least worth having and is possibly adequate for present or future advanced students of the various sciences etc. who do not ordinarily need to know how to speak or to write French correctly. Such persons read French to get at certain otherwise inaccessible ideas or information: there are many valuable French treatises of which no translation is published, or is published only after somebody else, through his knowledge of the French work, has been able to finish his research before we could finish ours, and thus steal our thunder, so to speak.

12. The ability to express one's own ideas in good written French.

13. The ability to pronounce correctly a passage which one is reading or something which one has learned by heart—a kind of ability indispensable to singers (many of whom do not understand, or hardly understand, what they are singing).

14. The ability to carry on, haltingly but otherwise correctly, our part in a conversation. This is always one of the early stages in the progress of persons who later become fluent. Fluency can be acquired only by the frequent and attentive reading of French (aloud rather than silently) and by frequent conversation. It is an immense advantage to live even for a little while in France; if that is impossible, at least to speak French as often as possible with persons who speak it correctly. Hence *Cercles français*, the *Alliance française*, occasional plays in French, etc. should not be neglected, and fortunate are those universities that have a *Maison française*.⁴

⁴In school (as later) French should be taught as a living language, as a language which (it should be assumed) some of the pupils will one day wish to speak and

15. Foreigners who can speak French "correctly" may nevertheless not speak it idiomatically, that is, their French is colourless. To "know [modern] French perfectly" (note this familiar word) is to know how to speak it and write it at least as well as one can speak and write one's mother tongue; "perfectly" is a vague term: one must be able to use French as well as certain classes of Frenchmen do.

16. We have all met at least one or two persons who were generally believed (even by their French friends) to speak French "perfectly" (*à merveille, sans le moindre accent*, etc.) simply because those persons were astute enough to confine their conversation strictly to subjects, to *expressions*, rather, of whose correctness they were sure.

17. As for those persons who have been declared to know "perfectly" three or four languages (in his Preface to a book by Jeremiah Curtin, a noted American chemist declares that Curtin spoke fifty or more languages and dialects), is it not literally true that no one ever existed, in any modern civilized country, who knew perfectly his own mother tongue? A person perfectly acquainted with his mother tongue would be at home (at least superficially) in all the sciences, arts, trades, etc. described by means of that particular mother tongue. Is it not a fact that none of us knows more than a certain rather small part of the English language or of the French language? The author of this analysis often finds himself compelled to use inaccurate terms, both in English and in French, simply because he does not know the right ones.

18. To know French well, one must obviously understand French customs, institutions, points of view, etc.—at least as well as ordinary French people understand them.

19. A good "reading knowledge" of French (by which most persons mean *modern* French) is a precious possession, for such knowledge alone opens to us an endless wealth of interesting, useful, and beautiful things; but our enjoyment of French literature

which a large number of them would like to learn how to speak as soon as possible. The ability to speak French (acceptably) is a kind of skill seldom if ever attained by even the most industrious and gifted student through classroom work (no matter how well directed); but, as an *ideal*, this power has, I think, a very great practical value.

will be limited indeed if we do not distinguish well, realize clearly and strongly, the physical nature, the physical characteristics, of the French in which such "artistic literature" (*belles-lettres*) is expressed. This is notably true of poetry, of poetical French verse. Like English poetry, the poetry of France offers its beauty most richly, not to the eye, but to the ear. Likewise most of what we call artistic prose—perhaps all that prose whose authors manifest (as does, for example, Anatole France) a relish for agreeable rhythms and for harmonious sounds. French poetry is a kind of music, and music is best appreciated by the ear.

20. Perhaps all foreigners who have accustomed their ear to all the sounds of spoken French prose have discovered that a complete comprehension of spoken French verse (for example, a play by Racine or Rostand) requires additional training. If sung, French verse is still more difficult to comprehend, that is, the sounds of French songs are (usually) harder for the untrained ear to distinguish than are the sounds of verse as recited on the stage, etc.

21. French literature is French literature not merely because it expresses the thoughts of French authors (and therefore enables us to study the thoughts of the French nation, or of France before the existence of the present national boundaries, for there was of course a time when, for example, the Burgundians and the "French" were at war with each other); it is also and, in my mind, essentially "French" *because it is written in French*. It hardly seems reasonable to designate as "French literature" any of the almost innumerable specimens of Latin prose or verse composed by Frenchmen during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, or later, even though such documents may express the most characteristic thoughts of certain authors more markedly than their writings in French. Again, it is hardly legitimate to speak of any translation of a French writing (however accurate, however artistic such a translation may be) as *French literature*. In a word, French literature, in the usual meaning of this term, is a phase of the French language—specifically, written or printed French of a more or less artistic character, though there are many persons who designate as "literature" writings (e.g. scientific, economic, metaphysical, etc.) to which the term *belles-lettres* is not ordinarily applied. Understanding by *French literature*

primarily and essentially a more or less artistic written expression of thought *in French*, I find it impossible to regard the title "professor of the French language and literature" as wholly well conceived; it is true that not all the French language is "literature," but *all French "literature"* (as I comprehend the situation) *is in the French language and no more separable therefrom than a statue is separable from the bronze, marble, or other material that makes the said statue perceptible to our senses.*

The charm or interest of any writing depends on how its author expresses himself (on his *style*) and though, in a given case (say, Pascal, Molière, or Alfred de Musset), a given critic may be able to set forth illuminatingly to a third party (the critic's audience or readers) a particular's writer's most salient characteristics, the critic, by reexpression, necessarily substitutes his *own* style, his *own* way of speaking or of writing, for the original form, which reappears only when faithfully quoted. If the critic happens to possess a profound and accurate knowledge of the French language (of its grammar, as defined by persons properly qualified to define it, and of its lexical bases) he may succeed in analyzing a given style so as really to demonstrate wherein it differs from that of other authors, from all other authors whom the critic happens to have studied carefully. Nearly the whole body of anonymous literature (medieval and modern), including virtually all its masterpieces, has *remained* anonymous when authorship has not been determined by the discovery of facts *not* derived from the identified author's manner of expressing himself, his style. It seems to me possible to exclude pure impressionism more or less from our studies of style, and I feel sure that I could point out convincingly some of the stylistic facts which differentiate Ronsard's lyrics from Victor Hugo's, or Victor Hugo's from Leconte de Lisle's, and, if I, or anyone else can do this, I possess, or someone else possesses, a certain kind of skill; but this kind of skill is based on linguistic criteria and linguistic knowledge.

22. Skill in grammatical analysis can be acquired by certain specially endowed minds; to most minds such analysis is more or less repugnant—usually, I believe, because it requires painstaking observation, a very intense application of the reasoning power (the ability to derive accurate conclusions from what the observer has properly selected as relevant data), and the rare ability to state

such conclusions with complete clearness. If the student is not encouraged to acquire this kind of skill he is studying language on a low plane intellectually and is therefore neglecting one of the principal objects, probably the principal object, of education: the power to *think* and to think accurately. To regard the study of any language as hardly more than a training of the memory (highly valuable though this training is) indicates a very imperfect understanding of the wealth of material that language (in the present case, French) offers for developing other great faculties of the brain.⁵

23. Lexicology (requiring precise grammatical knowledge) offers another field, closely related to grammar, for the exercise and development of skill. Any profound study of this branch is necessarily a study of the rise, transmission or influence, and decay or death of ideas. Even elementary knowledge of this branch is worth having and can be utilized to make the study of French more profitable. For example, a correct explanation of the origin of the idiom exemplified by *il a beau travailler*, *il a beau être riche* would be understood even by most beginners and every student of French should be frequently stimulated to endeavour himself to solve such problems; to pass them as if they were not problems is to miss just so many opportunities to develop one's thinking powers. How many teachers of French know whether once upon a time it would not have been "French" to say *parle-t-il* or *il a beau être riche*; I wonder how many, knowing the original forms, could correctly explain the present forms and thus not only enlighten their students but help their memories.⁶

⁵ Obviously, the teacher of French should know far more about French grammar than the best of his students know; it is nevertheless a fact that there are many teachers of French (hundreds, perhaps thousands) who know little more about this subject than can be learned from the two or three elementary (and, usually, not very accurate "grammars"—mostly dry and thoughtlessly dogmatic) which they themselves have studied; the fact is that "grammar" is generally made a bugbear because the fields which it necessarily includes are not generally included by any save the most expert specialists; nor is any of its three main domains studied carefully. In his Preface to Clédat's *Grammaire raisonnée* (see *Living French*, particularly §§ 157, 249), Gaston Paris hits the nail squarely on its head.

⁶ Whatever may be desirable in the secondary schools, in our colleges and universities French (the French language) can, and constantly should, be used to develop observation and accurate thinking; also the power to define: *Ce qui se conçoit bien s'énonce clairement*.

24. *Que veut dire "savoir le français"?* Why, to have merely a good "reading knowledge" of it *means* that one of the most interesting of the world's civilizations, one of the most instructive, one of the most inspiring, is far more accessible to our inquiries, far more vivid, far more enjoyable for any lover of first-hand knowledge, than that civilization can possibly be without this kind of *knowing*.

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